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SUBJECT: MALAWI HIGHLIGHTS - JANUARY 29

REF: A. 10 LILONGWE 29; B. 09 LILONGWE 650; C. 09 LILONGWE 696

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: The following is a compilation of recent highlights from the "Warm Heart of Africa."

-- ALL EYES ON MUTHARIKA AS HE DEPARTS FOR AU SUMMIT
-- BAIL FOR SAME-SEX COUPLE DENIED AGAIN
-- MALAWI'S PARLIAMENT BACK AT WORK
-- BUT MCP MP'S PROMPTLY WALK OUT
-- WEDDING BELLS FOR THE PRESIDENT

End summary.

ALL EYES ON MUTHARIKA AS HE DEPARTS FOR AU SUMMIT

¶2. (U) Out in full force to cover President Bingu wa Mutharika's 28 January departure for the upcoming AU summit in Addis Ababa, Malawi media is squarely focused on an anticipated showdown between Mutharika and Libya's Muammar al-Quadhafi over the AU Chairmanship. Leading headlines read "Gadaffi Plots Against Bingu" and "Bingu, Gadaffi Collide at AU." Prominent newspaper The Daily Times quoted Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Augustine Mtendere as saying, "We know that it is Malawi's turn. If Gadaffi wants to hold on to the chairmanship, we have nothing to do with that. It is wrong for him to stick to the chair." Referring to rumored donations by Libya to other AU members in order sway their votes, Mtendere said "We can't join that game because of money. We will play the game of rules; we will not play the game of money."

BAIL FOR SAME-SEX COUPLE DENIED AGAIN

¶3. (U) The Blantyre High Court denied the latest bail request from same-sex trial defendants Tiwonge Chimbalanga and Steven Monjeza on January 28. The couple made the request in response to the denial by the lower Blantyre Magistrate Court of an earlier

application (ref A). In making the ruling, High Court Judge Rowland Mbvundula echoed the reasoning behind the prior refusal in that "releasing the couple would endanger their safety and induce a sense of shock or outrage among the public." The trial is scheduled to resume after 1 February.

MALAWI'S PARLIAMENT BACK AT WORK

¶4. (SBU) Malawi's National Assembly got back to work after President Mutharika opened the new session on 26 January. The opening of the 42nd Session of Parliament was marked by a forty minute State of the Union Address from Mutharika entitled "The Dream Come True" where he catalogued his administration's gains in economic development and food security for the country. The president strongly noted China's support of several concessionary projects in Malawi, including an international conference center, a five-star hotel and twenty Presidential villas in Lilongwe, but failed to express gratitude for the efforts of Malawi's other development partners. Observers were quick to point out that Mutharika did not address Malawi's recent forex woes and fuel shortages (ref B). Some opposition party members went so far as to dismiss the speech as a mere "repetition of last year's statement. " United Democratic Front House Leader Ibrahim Matola was quoted

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as saying "There are many loopholes in that speech and we look forward to finding out how government will respond on those issues." Parliament plans to be in session for three weeks.

MCP MP'S PROMPTLY WALK OUT

¶5. (SBU) Drama unfolded on the first full day of the new parliament on 27 January when tempers flared over the seating plan for opposition MPs. Still smarting from controversial standing rule changes passed in the body's last session (ref C), eight Malawi Congress Party (MCP) members chose to walk out rather than sit behind the ruling party's hand-picked Leader of the Opposition Abele Kayembe. When the MCP members refused to budge after being ordered by Speaker Chimunthu Banda to take their assigned seats, Banda summoned the sergeant-at-arms to forcibly remove the eight. Highlighting the deep fissures in Malawi's main opposition party, the members then followed MCP boss (and losing presidential candidate) John Tembo out of the chamber. Cooler heads prevailed the next day when the MCP MP's took their assigned seats.

WEDDING BELLS FOR THE PRESIDENT

¶6. (U) It is now official: President Mutharika will tie the knot with former Minister of Tourism and Wildlife Callista Chapola Chimombo. Ending several months of speculation over the relationship between widower Mutharika and widow Chimombo, a statement from State House announced that the two will be engaged in a traditional ceremony on Valentine's Day (February 14) and then walk to the altar on Malawi Labour Day (May 1). Malawi media and the public had been abuzz after several recent public events where Chimombo was seated next to or near the President. Speculation increased when in December, in an apparent breach of protocol, the future first lady was seated next to Mutharika while Malawi's Vice President Joyce Banda occupied the third seat over. Chimombo was also recently named Malawi's High Commissioner to Zimbabwe, but it is unclear whether she still plans to take up the position.

BODDE